

# The Tide is Turning: Elections in Turkey

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Turkey is used to have very fast changes in politics. The centrist party which formed the government after the military intervention in 1982, for example, which claimed to unify all political ideologies under its roof by the liberal leadership of Turgut Özal, *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party), has vanished after his leader's contentious death. One day it was omnipresent, the other day it was not there. Another example is *Demokratik Sol Parti* (Democratic Left Party) of Bülent Ecevit, the most leftist leader of the Turkish politics in the history. Sailing before the wind of the seizure of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish terrorist organisation PKK, the party gained 22% of the votes in the general elections of 1999 and formed a coalition government with two small parties. But an economic crisis struck the country, and Ecevit got only 1.22% in 2002. One of the biggest surprises in this same elections was *Genç Parti* (Young Party) which was formed by a young and charismatic businessman without a political background, Cem Uzan, only seven months before the elections. The party got more than 7% of the votes. Due to the 10% threshold, the highest in the world, the party could not get in the parliament, and afterwards, its leader had to flee to France because of some corruption investigations.

Will the elections tomorrow change the course of the country in an equally abrupt and

infinitely more dramatic manner? Is the seemingly limitless power of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) about to crumble? It's too early to say. But it is definitely possible.

## The Rise of Erdoğan

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The AKP has emerged at the end of latest period of political turmoil under the charismatic leadership of Erdoğan, former mayor of Istanbul, from the ashes of several banned Islamic parties. Thanks to this high threshold, after the 3 November 2002 elections, AKP and the secular and oldest party of Turkey, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party) found themselves alone in the parliament. 42% of the votes did not transform into parliamentary seats. Nevertheless, AKP and CHP did not see any reason to repeat the elections since, finally, some sorely missed degree of stability had returned to Turkish politics.

During the first two terms of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with the support of the European Union countries, Turkey got closer to Europe. Human rights developed, and the role of the army in politics decreased. The concerns of the secular segments of the society about the Islamisation of the country and the rise of an authoritarian regime were by and large ignored by international actors. In 2007 a big political crisis occurred between AKP and CHP during the election of the new president by the parliament. Erdoğan wanted his "political brother" (his "silent opponent" today), Abdullah Gül to be elected. CHP boycotted the sessions to obstruct the vote. That did not stop AKP to continue to the second round of voting. The Constitutional Court intervened on the side of the CHP. The response from AKP was harsh: a proposal of a constitutional amendment on the presidential election. At the referendum, the majority of the Turkish population agreed to elect the president directly in a French-style run-off election. Snap general elections took place, and AKP and the ultra-nationalist party which agreed on Abdullah Gül as president got enough chairs in the parliament and Gül had been elected for this position. At the end of the day, Erdoğan had won the battle against CHP and the Constitutional Court.

The Constitution of 1982 which was prepared and approved under the military rule, had established a parliamentary regime with a symbolically strong president. Politicians were distrusted, and the army saw the president as a paternalistic figure above all political parties and ideologies. Therefore, the holder of this position was not considered as a political figure but as someone capable to dictate his/her opinion to political parties whenever he/she wants. The selection of the president by the parliament fitted to this ideal. But after the constitutional referendum, Turkey found itself the same odd situation as in Austria: a general election for a non-political position. What would he/she promise the people to be elected? "I'll sit on this chair better than any other"? What if he/she uses the symbolic constitutional powers in daily politics as one of the heads of the executive branch?

This amendment paved the road to a process of constitutional reform. Even before, during the electoral campaigns, all of the main political parties had promised a new constitution for different reasons. But the amendment on the election of the president created a constitutional need for a new approach since it had created an unharmonious fusion of two different political regimes. In May 2012 a commission formed by four political parties in the

parliament started to write a draft for a new constitution. But after a year of hard work, the commission was blocked because of the insistence of AKP on a presidential system which would facilitate a “one-man rule” of Erdoğan. Eventually, the process has collapsed at the end of 2013.

## From moderate Islamism to an authoritarian regime

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2013 was a tough year for Erdoğan at all points. Beside this constitutional troubles, he had to face mass protests by middle-class secularists and corruption investigations towards his ministers. In two waves of investigations on 17th and 25th of December 2013 lots of people connected with the government including sons of some ministers were arrested. After the first shock, Erdoğan struck back by arguing that these investigations, through which lots of illegal wiretappings were published online, were a part of a *coup d'état* led by what he called FETÖ (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü* – Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation). Fethullah Gülen, once an ally and partner of the Turkish governments, who owns several educational institutions in Turkey and around the world, banks, media and construction companies, lived up to his title and organised a failed putsch in mid-summer of 2016 to overthrow Erdoğan. Since then, Turkey is ruled under a state of emergency and is in turmoil without constitutional protections severely weakened. Not only Gülen supporters, but also leftists, human rights defenders, advocates, journalists, academics and other opponents in all fields lost their jobs, properties and in some cases their lives.

Erdoğan's feeling that he is losing the control of the country was the background before which AKP and its small nationalist ally *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Movement Party) finally agreed on a new constitutional amendment to eliminate the confusion of an elected president in a parliamentary regime and decided to transform the country into a strong presidential system.

After a scandalous “rule changing decision” of the Higher Electoral Board, which obviously violated electoral law, on the validity of the votes in unstamped envelopes in the middle of the election day, the constitutional referendum of 16 April 2017 officially was approved by 51,41% of the voters. The office of prime minister was abolished, and the ministries were attached to the presidency which has been transformed from a symbolic position into the single political executive organ of the republic. Amongst his/her newly added controversial powers is the right to dissolve the parliament whenever he/she wants and to legislate through regulations which are not in accordance with a democratic presidential system.

## Things do not work out as Erdoğan calculated

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After the referendum victory, however, the tide started to turn. Erdoğan's ally MHP started to lose support due to the internal turmoil caused by the opponents of Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the party. Therefore, these two parties agreed on a change in the electoral law allowing the formation of alliances between parties. This amendment, approved in March 2018, aimed to secure MHP its seats in parliament even if it fails the threshold. The plan was simple: Erdoğan who is still the charismatic leader of at least half of the population (mostly through manipulation by the media corporations owned or seized by his allies) would become the powerful president, and AKP and MHP deputies would dominate the

parliament which is now a weaker, even negligible organ in the system. So, in a country where the opposition parties are far from being unified, Erdoğan would rule the country alone without any serious opposition. That's why when Mr Bahçeli called for early elections in April and when Erdoğan turned it into a snap election on 24th of June, they were quite certain of the outcome.

But, as I said, Turkey is an unpredictable country. Suddenly, things have reversed. First, a new nationalist MHP spin-off under the leadership of Meral Akşener, the *İyi Parti* (Good Party), competes for the support of MHP's nationalist and secular supporters who are fed up with Mr Bahçeli's annexation to Mr Erdoğan. Through the snap elections, the coalition of Erdoğan and Bahçeli (which reminds a lot the one of Victor Orban's Fidesz and KDNP Party Alliance in Hungary) tried to stop *İyi Parti* and Ms Akşener to run, but the secular CHP provided unexpected support by transferring its 15 deputies to form a parliamentary group. Besides, Ms Akşener got easily 100.000 signatures of the eligible voters which are the prerequisite for running for the presidency in the new system. The second "surprise" for the Erdoğan-Bahçeli coalition was the nomination of Muharrem İnce as the CHP candidate for the presidency, a good orator whose promise of serenity and peace attracted a lot of people's support in a highly divided society. The other parties including the new nationalist party, the Kurdish party and even an Islamist party declared openly or implicitly their support for him in the second round of the elections which will take place if Erdoğan fails to get 50%+1 vote in the first round on 24th of June.

On the other hand, for the parliamentary elections, the impossible has happened: With an unexpected move, three opposition parties (CHP, *İyi Parti* and the Islamist *Saadet Partisi* [Felicity Party]) created "the National Alliance". In a country where the main problem of the opposition parties since the beginning of the democratic history is the lack of solidarity, nobody was expecting this unprecedented cooperation.

The "winner" of The National Alliance can already be declared: *Saadet Partisi* which had around 2% of the votes in the previous elections. The biggest reason for this low electoral support was the high threshold, but now, as part of the alliance, they can expect 4-5% of the votes of conservative voters unhappy with AKP's governmental performance and corruption issues.

## Everything is possible now

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To sum up, I can say that Turkey is on the edge of a new era. After 24th June, if the new president or the parliament do not change it again, a semi-presidential political regime will be in effect. The surprising development is that, even before the full execution of the new system, the Turkish opposition parties adapted very quickly. Each of them has its presidential candidate, and these candidates are willing to support each other explicitly or implicitly in the case of a second round. On the other hand, Erdoğan and his ally who first called for an early election seem to be losing popularity and support of the society. All the amendments to the electoral law that they recently approved started to function against them, including the new semi-presidential system. Erdoğan took a risk. It was a game of "win all or lose everything", and he has never been so close to losing everything in his whole political carrier.

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